WOULD A CENSOR BRING PROSPERITY TO THEATRES?

Question of Play Supervision Stirred by Unusually Dull Season, but Managers, Actors, Playwrights, Producers and Laymen Seem to Agree Restriction Would Do More Harm Than Good—Al H. Woods Favors Idea of Government Inspection of Drama as Safeguard

WHAT is the matter with the theatre? is a question worrying actors, playwrights, producers and owners. Something deeper than the competition of the movies is suspected, something else than mere economy on the part of the public. It even has been suggested that the stage needs a censor to raise the standard of plays and make them acceptable to the people at large. Just what is thought of a possible censorship is told in the symposium presented to its readers by The New York Herald to-day.

By LAWRENCE REAMER.

Left to Right: Al H. Woods, David Belasco, Marc Klaw, Augustus Thomas, John Golden, Lee Shubert whose opinions on theatre censorship are instructive from many important angles, especially those of art and the box office.

Left to Right: William Harris, Jr., Edgar Selwyn, Sam H. Harris, practical theatre men who speak plainly about censors.

SO far there has been no actual step in the direction of a theatre censorship taken by representatives of the law who believe that the actions of the theatre managers need to be held in some sort of a check if the decency of the theatre in this country is to be maintained. Nor, for that matter, has anybody outside the law, as yet, taken any measures to bring such a measure before the public and thus eventually before the legislative bodies that would make such a measure a legal restraint on the managers.

"As yet," is the qualifying phrase which describes the present security of the impresarios. Nobody has taken any step to bring about the existence of a theatre censorship. But the subject is in the air. It is discussed whenever a manager is told to bring to an end the performances of a dirty play or there is the threat that a theatre license may be revoked unless the producer of some especially rancid farce causes its representations to cease.

The censorship of the moving pictures has naturally turned the thoughts of the public to the stage, which in this particular season has been frequently accused of flagrantly violating the laws of dramatic decency. Quiet advocacy of the plan has been heard of in more than one official quarter.

Comes to the Fore This Year In Effort to Fill Theatres

It is enough for the managers, of course, that the scheme has been discussed as the possible remedy for a condition which came into existence through their own fault. If the subject has been more in the air this year than ever before, its prevalence was due to the unusual efforts the managers have been compelled to make to interest the public in the theatre.

Following the extravagant, thoughtless orgy of money spending which came during the last two years of the war and for a year after the armistice, the theatres prospered as they rarely had before. All sorts of inferior plays met with sufficient success to lead their managers to the belief that anything would "go." In the sober reaction to a period of economy these pieces went, and, for that matter, so did many others that may have deserved a better fate. It simply happened that the public, full up with theatregoing which was not nearly so good as it might have been, began to keep away from the playhouses.

To this day it takes unusual merit to fill a theatre. There are plays that enjoy weekly a degree of financial success that would have seemed impossible a decade ago. "Sally," "The Music Box Review," "Good Morning, Dearie," "The Circle" and a few others are able to get $7 and $8 a ticket on Saturdays, and the weekly receipts hover in the neighborhood of $25,000. This does not indicate that the public has given up all plays or that only frivolous ones are proving attractive, for Sothern and Marlowe played at the Century Theatre to receipts that exceeded $5,000 at the Saturday matinees alone.

But only the best are making any such appeal to the public. The managers, seeking to arouse theatregoers from their apparent apathy, have been seeking to find something stimulating to a jaded appetite. The common denominator in this country—the one element common to all the nations that make up the great American public from which the theatre must live—is, in the opinion of every theatre manager, sex. If he can get a play with a strong appeal to sex it will bring in every division of the public. The stronger he makes the sex appeal the greater are his chances of permanent success.

Driven to Unprecedented Lengths To Provide the Sex Appeal

It is this theory which has driven some of the more or less "rattled" purveyors of entertainment to lengths they never went before. If it were possible to make the sex appeal as strong as possible they would see that their authors did not let up on that phase of their play. The authors have proved themselves most complaisant. They might be shy on story, on humor or technique or on other qualities that made a play successful, yet they were never at a loss to supply what might prove to be the necessary element in a sex farce.

So there came the long and wearisome procession of these obnoxious plays, the reaction of public opinion against them, the occasional interference of the police and the final murmurings about the necessity of a censorship which might pass on such plays and arrest them in their poisonous flight before they reach the stage.

The English censorship has long been a source of irritation to the London managers. It has kept from the stage not only plays that were supposed to be prurient in character but others that were banned for no reasons connected with their morality. Bernard Shaw said the censorship only condemned what it considered frivolous immorality and made little or no effort to put an end to the kind of farce which has attracted the attention of the police this year. But there have been certain French farces that for years were kept off the London stage as well as such serious plays as "Camille," which were only admitted after radical revision even if there was nothing more drastic than the version of Dumas's drama which Henry James once saw in Boston in which the hero and heroine were vaguely referred to as "engaged."

Religious and Diplomatic Reasons Factors in English Censorship

Only a few weeks ago "Mecca," which was acted here at the Century Theatre, was prohibited in London because the name had a religious meaning to many British subjects. After it was changed to "Cairo" the spectacle was shown. The visit of a certain Japanese potentate one summer caused the abandonment of a projected production of "The Mikado" on the ground that it might offend the visitors. Thus have diplomatic, and especially religious, considerations often inspired the actions of the London censor. It was only in recent years that the production of Saint-Saens's "Samson and Dalilah" was permitted. The opera was founded on a Biblical subject, and that was enough in a country with an Established Church.

No such questions will vex the American theatre manager. But he will have to encounter an outside influence in his business to which he is bitterly opposed. It may be for that reason that there is almost complete unanimity in his opposition to a censorship. The most important of the managers have expressed their opinions for The New York Herald. The actor in E. H. Sothern and the playgoer in Paul Cravath have also added their views.

A. L. Erlanger and David Belasco, while uniting in their opposition, have expressed their opinions in a few words. Mr. Belasco says:

"The public has always regulated, and always will regulate, the theatre in America. The success or failure of a play is in their hands. They are the great jury, whose verdict is always just."

Mr. Erlanger seems inclined to hold the authors responsible. He says:

"The theatre does not need a censorship. What it does need is authors who can write successful plays without depending on indecencies for their climaxes."

Marc Klaw and Lee Shubert are equally opposed to such a manner of dealing with the morality of plays. Mr. Klaw said:

"I am unalterably and unequivocally opposed to censorship of pictures, drama or newspapers in this country. We have enough laws on the statute books to protect the people from danger from either of these sources, and if they are not properly enforced that is the fault of the officials rather than the laws. There is too much delegated authority already in America. Few people for whom we have the privilege of voting exercise any real authority over us at present. It is usually delegated to some society or some individual who uses it for the purposes of self-exploitation.

Joins in Belief That Public Is Best Censor in the End

"The drama in America has struggled along pretty well and remained pretty clean as a rule; and when public sentiment is strong enough to turn its back upon unclean plays they will fail, and without public sentiment laws they are only partially enforceable. The lamentable situation in reference to prohibition is a good illustration in point. I heard Henry Watterson once say, 'No matter how damned bad a newspaper was it was usually one degree better than the people who read it.' Maybe that applies also to the people who go to see the unclean plays. We have had real experience in one or two of the Western cities with an attempt at censorship and the outcome was absurd.

"Very often a manuscript does not indicate any lewdness whatever, whereas the performance might disclose a great deal. So let the play be produced and stand or fall on its decency or lack of it. No censorship for me!"

In reference to a stage censorship Lee Shubert said:

"The speaking stage is not in need of a censorship. Such a supervision placed in the hands of two or three men would prove detrimental to the drama, for it would be difficult to find exactly the right people to pass upon plays. After all, the public is the best and surest arbiter, and I do not recall any instances where a really bad, immoral or vicious play has been allowed to continue.

"If the public makes up its mind that a play is not suited for public presentation the law offers a remedy. Plays are not produced in quantities as are moving pictures, and the *modus operandi* is totally different. In fact, there is little comparison between moving picture censorship and censorship of the spoken play. It is my opinion that if such a censorship is established the theatre will suffer."

No manager feels more strongly on the subject than Arthur Hopkins. He may be said, however, to take a merely theoretical interest in the matter, since he has never stood in any danger of the action of such a public official even if he had existed. The Hopkins theatre has usually been singularly free from the kind of play that might attract the attention of the prurient. But he says:

"Censorship is the assumption before the fact that some one contemplates evil, and as such is unfair and pernicious. Criminal law confines itself to the person who is charged with an offence already committed. It takes away no freedom of action from the citizen on the assumption that with the exercise of such freedom he may become a criminal.

Law Is Ample as It Stands, Says William A. Brady

"If there are not at present ample laws to punish the person who offends against public decency let more stringent laws be enacted. But let them be entirely confined to the person charged with an offence that has already been committed. By this process the person charged is given the right of public trial and the protection of the courts in the presentation of his defence.

"Censorship is arbitrary and permits of no appeal. As such, it is autocratic and un-American and in itself is a greater evil than the evil it seeks to correct."

William A. Brady, who sowed his wild oats so long ago that "The Turtle" and "Mlle. Fifi" have been forgotten by all but a few of those old reminiscencers who will talk about the old days of the drama, speaks now to the point:

"Censorship is un-American. The proper use of police power would render censorship unnecessary. As existing laws provide punishment for those who violate them, any one who produces an objectionable play can be punished by fine and imprisonment. Censorship has failed wherever it has been tried.

"Enforce the law and there will be no need of censorship."

"The effects of a possible censorship in the American theatre would be too varied for any man to predict in precise detail just what they would be," was the first explanation of Sam H. Harris. Then he went on:

"The first immediate effect, of course, would be to put a halter on initiative. The playwright would have to throw away his inspiration, and for a substitute he would have a set of rules laid down by a board of politically hand picked censors. The writing of plays would become mechanical, and this most important of the arts of the theatre would deteriorate.

"Secondly, the producer would become, in effect, merely an employee of the censor's office. He would hesitate to encourage new playwriting talent. His own judgment would be valueless. His experience would be pigeonholed. His honesty of purpose would be continuously under suspicion.

"It is no wild guess to assume that play censorship would be followed by press censorship. The censor habit would spread until every art and profession came under its influence. This might not materialize in one generation, but it would be inevitable. And then we would find that experiment, the very life of artistic and professional enterprise, would have to be abandoned.

"I have been asked many times whether I am in favor of censorship in the theatre. This is a question that cannot be answered with a blunt 'yes' or 'no.' If I say 'yes' I imply that there is need of censorship. If I say 'no' I indicate that I fear its effect upon my own productions.

"The question must be answered with an explanation. Our present laws can be trusted to dispose of any plays that might be calculated to exert immoral influence. We do not need and never have needed a censorship to right any wrong in the theatre.

"Personally I never have and never will produce any play that would offend any one's morals. There are enough plays that are sane, healthy and artistic to supply every theatrical producer with material for his productions. A sufficient number of them come to my desk every season to keep me busy.

Calls Censorship Autocratic And Unsuited to a Democracy

"But after all, there is one answer that finally disposes of the question of censorship. This is a democratic country and censorship is autocratic. Even the censorship partisans cannot deny this fact."

"Just as a business man in the theatre," said William Harris, Jr., "I should not object to censorship. There are circumstances under which I should welcome it. It would simplify matters greatly if when an author submitted a play I could send it to the censor and ask, 'Is there any objection to this play?' If there were objection I should not try it at all. The play would go back to the author, who would be the chief sufferer. For the manager that's a much better system than the present one of paying an author in advance, getting elaborate production and an expensive cast all under contract, and then having a play closed peremptorily with a loss say of $40,000, merely because some official didn't like it.

"But, remember, that is only a business consideration. It doesn't take into account the aspirations of author, director or manager who wishes to see fine things done in the theatre. There you have the tragedy of running up against a blank wall in censorship. You might have the case of a fine work of art—you very conceivably would have such a case if the play discussed any of the serious problems of sex—and you couldn't produce the play at all if the censor said, 'No.' That's not a matter of dollars and cents. It is an artist being denied his expression, and few things are worse.

"In theory, censorship has advantages, of course, and if one could get the ideal person for censor many problems would be solved. But where would you get the ideal person? He should be a man or woman of culture and achievement, preferably a person of distinction. But the more you search, Diogenes like, for such a wise man or woman the more you find that such people of importance shy away from such a task. They realize that their personal prejudices would be involved, try as they might to keep them out and they instinctively hesitate to accept the responsibility of judging for the public at large.

"Of course, there are people seeking position in the public eye who are glad to take such jobs, and in the majority of cases they get the jobs. But once they get in they not only carry personal prejudices of their own; they become the football of prejudices of any organized group of citizens. As a result, in actual practice censorship is abominable. It has been stupidly administered in the past, and it will be just as stupidly administered, no doubt, in future.

"There never has been a play produced, I dare say, that didn't annoy some one so much he wanted to stop it. The case of 'Abraham Lincoln' is significant. Between the time Mr. Drinkwater's play was announced and the time that I actually produced it letters poured in denouncing me as a traitor for bringing over this play by an Englishman. In connection with this play I've been called about everything undesirable. Only the other day a committee at a Southern convention denounced the play bitterly. How little they knew about it may be judged from the fact that they thought Booth Tarkington was the author!

Fears a Militant Minority Bullying a Supine Majority

"You may say that in such a case only cranks protest. But I have a suspicion we call them cranks only because there are few of them. When they increase in numbers and they become thoroughly organized, we find that great menace of all democracies—the militant minority by sheer bullying in legislative halls or executive offices enforcing its will over a supine majority. The censor is an ideal instrument in the hands of a militant minority. We have few enough liberties left. They may establish a censorship over our theatre, the way things are going now, but I sincerely hope not."

Edgar Selwyn expressed his disapproval of a possible censorship thus:

"The most essential thing in every worth while achievement is freedom. The American theatre has taken such progressive strides because it has been unhampered by censorship. It equals, if not excels, any theatre in the world to-day because it has depended entirely upon the good taste of the public for its censorship. Any other censorship would be a tragedy.

"Nor is there the slightest need of censorship. Vulgar plays seldom make money for a producer. Thanks to the good taste of the American public, they usually die of inanition. Once in a while they gain some sensational publicity which excites the morbid curiosity of people, but even the morbidly curious public is a very limited one, and will not support a play for any long period of time.

"Never has there been greater proof than this season that the demand is for plays of quality. The fact that such plays as 'The Circle' and 'A Bill of Divorcement' have played steadily to capacity business is proof enough that there is an abiding appreciation of merit on the part of the New York audiences. It is only the stupidly vulgar or mediocre things which have suffered for patronage."

Who would ever have thought that A. H. Woods would be the man to speak the first word in favor of the scorned censor? But he was. It was he who said when the recent discussion as to the propriety of one of his productions was at its height:

"The only safe course for the theatrical manager, as well as for the public, in the future is to have a censor. I want a censor to whom I can submit the manuscript of a play before I have invested a penny in it and find out from him whether or not I can produce the play. If he sanctions it then I know that I am safe from official interference thereafter. If he does not sanction it I have not lost anything.

Al H. Woods Sees Protection For the Producer in Plan

"Judgments as to the morality or immorality of a play differ. There are as many opinions as there are people. It seems too risky for a manager to trust his own in the production of a play. The authorities may differ with him, and the authorities hold the cards. The manager may be right, but that's unimportant. He can evidently be considerably damaged before the courts decide whether he is right or wrong. No man wants to play a game in which he loses before the game starts. A censor would protect the theatrical manager, not only from his own mistakes but from an official authority that may also make mistakes.

"I have two plays now that are cast, and for one of which the production is ready. I think they are perfectly moral. One of them was a success in London, where they have a censor. But the New York officials may not think they are moral. I want some one to whom I can go and get an official opinion as to their legality before I have invested from $25,000 to $50,000 in them, only to find that I must close them because somebody who differs from me has the authority to close them before I've been condemned by courts constituted to try such matters."

Although John Golden is proud of the spotless character of his plays, he does not believe that morality in general is to be maintained by a censorship. So he expresses his conclusion in these words:

"I am against a stage censorship. Personally, I have shown my leaning for humorous plays without an unclean line with so much emphasis that there is perhaps an impression I am to be regarded as in favor of a stage censorship.

"I am unalterably opposed to it. I have no hope that it would be beneficial; I am as certain it would stunt the growth of the American drama, interfere with the accomplishment of the ultimate end of all theatrical effort—the realization of a national literary drama—as I am certain that if there were such censors in other centuries there never would have been a Shakespeare, a Beaumont or Fletcher or a Sophocles. This generation must strive for the literary drama or draw a blank in the history of dramatic literature.

"I wouldn't give up an afternoon of golf to listen to any one who thought he could persuade me that three or six or sixty men could constitute a jury to decide just what 100,000,000 people ought to have for beneficial amusement. These millions are casting their ballot in direct vote every evening and several matinees a week through the ticket windows of American theatres. Abe Lincoln believed in the people, and his opinion is good enough for me. They're faster than Jersey justice in sending a bad play to the storehouse.

Cites Baseball as Example Of What Public Can Do

"The entertainment that brings the largest attendance in America, from 30,000 to 50,000 at a single performance, is baseball. Now, public opinion eliminated the spitball in pitching, and it will kill off the slimy in theatrical producton, even though a few roughnecks like it."

E. H. Sothern is probably the last actor who might under any circumstances have any apprehension as to the activity of a censor. He and Miss Marlowe, who for so many years have acted only in the plays of Shakespeare, stand on a height of their own. Speaking for his profession, he said:

"I am opposed to a censorship of plays. I believe that public opinion will best correct any error of taste in the presentation of a play. The general desire is for clean and wholesome entertainment; such has ever been the most prosperous in America. The play of unpleasant flavor soon expires. One will be told that much that is exhibited on our stage is frivolous. Well, very many people like what is light and trivial in the way of entertainment, nor should they be condemned to perpetual solemnity so long as what is gay is also free from offence.

"A censor might easily do more harm than good. In England and in some other countries such an official has been a source of contention constantly.

"The privilege of free speech is not to be lightly interfered with. A drama too strenuously controlled might dwindle into nothingness. A really wise and capable censor would be almost impossible to find. His qualifications would have to be numerous and superlative. The position might become political, which, I think, would be deplorable.

"I am for a free theatre; the public and the press will take care that it is a healthy theatre. I am for community theatres, where a management of the people will produce fine plays at a small price without regard to profit. I am for a children's theatre, where children will learn to love the best drama—not baby talk drama, but plays they will want to see again whenever they are finely played.

"Ambitious and capable actors have always had the greatest influence on public taste, so let us pray for men and women who will aspire to play the great roles."

Augustus Thomas, for Dramatists, Joins Managers in Opposition

Augustus Thomas, most eminent of American playwrights, was selected to speak for the dramatists. He joins with the managers in his opposition to the proposed censorship. He said:

"On principle I am opposed to a censorship of any kind of publication, whether books, plays, pictures or newspapers. I am most opposed, as a matter of practice, to a censorship of plays, not because I am a professional playwright, but for the reason that what is likely to be the objectionable thing in a production is frequently not evident in the script of a play.

"I am not opposed to, but, on the contrary, am in favor of, holding the theatre to strict accountability and to proper standards of decency by the exercise of the machinery already existing for that purpose, if necessary strengthening that machinery, and would be glad to see a rule that would take a license away from the producer who showed a repeated disposition to offend."

Paul D. Cravath was one of the founders of the New Theatre and has always been an enthusiastic patron of the theatre. So he gave to The New York Herald the view of the layman in these words:

"I am opposed to censorship for the theatre. Censorship of literary and artistic productions is against the genius of our institutions. It should never be resorted to except in cases of strong necessity. No such necessity exists in the case of the American theatre. We have many dull plays and many vulgar plays, but few plays that are really subversive of good morals.

"The gain from censorship would be entirely too slight to justify the serious interference with liberty of thought and expression that it would involve. Another radical objection to censorship is the difficulty of securing a wise censor. Censors usually become narrow and arbitrary and slaves to false standards.

"I think the remedy against demoralizing plays lies in the more rigorous enforcement of the authority that now exists in the public authorities to prevent the production of demoralizing plays. Authors and producers would rarely risk the production of objectionable plays if they knew that their production would be stopped by the public authorities. I think the proper exercise of the police power would adequately protect the public, while obviating the evils of censorship."

Here are four more who discuss censors: Left to Right: Paul D. Cravath, William A. Brady, A. L. Erlanger, E. H. Sothern. They represent a large part of the theatre loving public.